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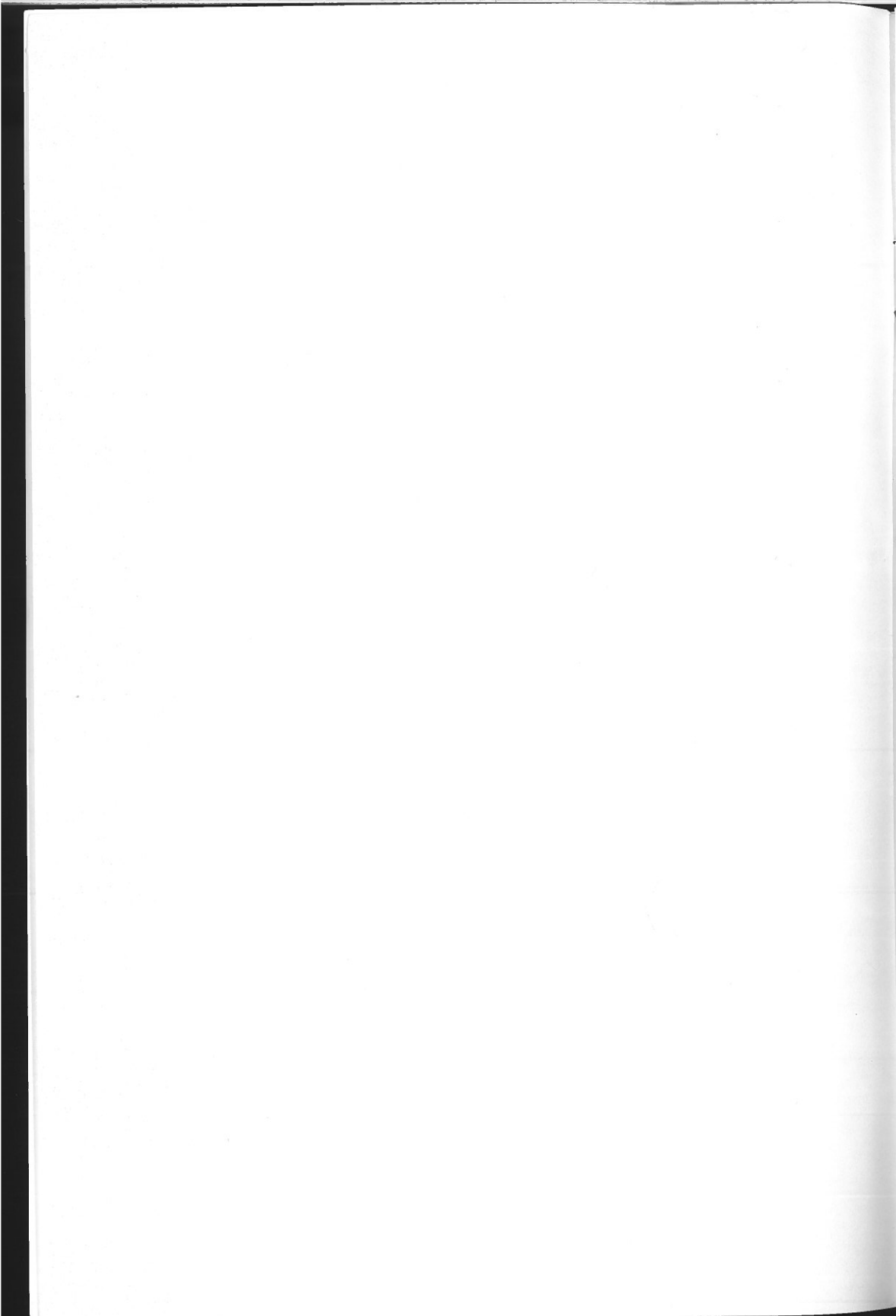
Cover: From the Map of Middlesex County, 1856, by H. F. Walling.

# In Graves Unmarked

## Slavery and Abolition in Stoneham, Massachusetts



*Ben Jacques*



## Acknowledgement

Anthropologist and author Zora Neale Hurston once said: "Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose." Neither historian nor ethnographer, I, nevertheless, have spent a good deal of time over the last two years poking and prying. I hope the stories to follow will enlighten and inspire, as we continue our quest to better understand where we come from, and where we are going.

Many of these stories were first told in columns in the *Stoneham Independent*. In editing, I have tried to keep the tone informal. In documenting my sources, I have used the in-text method of the Modern Language Association (MLA). In most cases, the author or title are named in the text. Page numbers, where applicable, are in parentheses after quotes. Many of the books and articles warrant further reading. And many of the questions I raise are still looking for answers.

I am most grateful to several friends and colleagues for help in research and editing. They include Joan Quigley of the Stoneham Historical Commission; the teacher Sybil Gilchrist, historian, sociologist and author Maynard Seider, historian and archivist Beth Bower, professor and author Herlinda Saitz, the Rev. Merrie Allen, the Rev. Dirkje Legerstee, and Debbie Sullivan of the Book Oasis. Thanks also to Donna Weiss and the Stoneham Historical Society and to Tom Clark and the staff of the Congregational Library in Boston. Still others gave me valuable feedback on my drafts and design, including members of my extended family.

Finally, thanks to Rebecca, my wife, for her love and support.





*Tenderly will I use you curling grass,  
It may be you transpire from the breasts of  
young men,  
It may be if I had known them I would have  
loved them,  
It may be you are from old people, or from  
offspring taken soon out of their mothers'  
laps,  
And here you are the mothers' laps.*

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*



*The Old Burying Ground in Stoneham.*

*Author's photo.*

## Here Lie Buried

**I**n winter the bare trees are black against the snow and sky in the Old Burying Ground on Pleasant Street. Like frosting, snow decorates the gravestones of our town's early families. The Bryants, the Bucknams, the Gerrys, the Greens, the Goulds, the Hays, the Hills, the Southers, the Spragues, the Stevens, the Richardsons, the Vintons, the Wrights. Our founders.

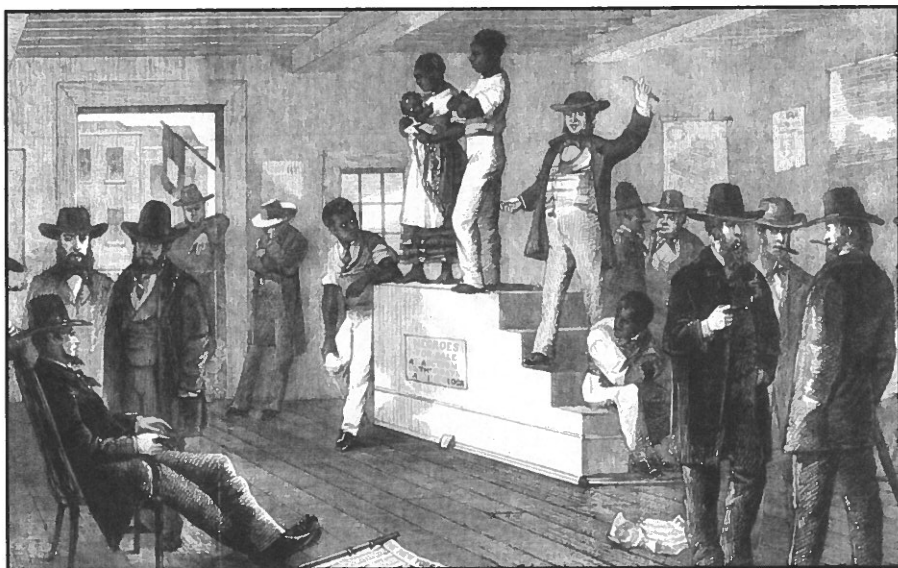
But beyond the cluster of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century stones, there are bare spots where no markers disturb the gentle slope of the earth. Here those with no status in colonial Stoneham lie in unmarked graves. Here are buried the town's slaves.

Who were these people, these enslaved men and women who, along with our European ancestors, built Stoneham? Who toiled without pay or expectation of freedom? Who, in some cases, married, had children and attended church, but were prescribed by race and circumstance to the lowest rung of society?

The first white settlers in Stoneham, then called Charlestown End, arrived in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, about two decades after English colonists led by John Winthrop founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Not long after, came the slaves.

The earliest record I could find of slaves in the Stoneham area is in Elbridge Goss' *History of Melrose*. It appears in a 1653 order from the General Court, stipulating that a slave owned by Job Lane, named Ebedmeleck, must be punished for "stealing victuals and breaking open a window on the Lord's day." He shall "be whipt with five stripes" (457).

Another reference is found in the 1671 will of Deacon Thomas Lynde of Malden. It reads: "...I give and bequeath to her [his wife, Rebekah] my Negro Peter and Negro girl Haru to enjoy and dispose of as she sees good" (59-60).



*A slave auction, Illustrated London News, 1861.*

Thomas Lynde's son, Joseph, born in 1652, also owned a slave, Dinah, whom he willed to his wife (65). Two other Lyndes are mentioned, Jabez and John. Goss writes: "Captain John [Lynde] owned a Negro boy, Samson, whom he disposed of by this same will made in 1747" (75).

Goss also includes the Sprague family. "In 1753 Phinias Sprague bought a Negro woman, Pidge and a boy, for 33 pounds, 6 shillings and 8 pence. Sprague was said to own several Negroes" (85-86).

The following comparison is chilling:

*The comparative value of human flesh in Malden may be known by the inventory of Deacon John Pratt, which was made in 1742, when an "oald negroman" and a cow were valued alike at 10 pounds each. The inventory of the estate of Ezra Green, made in 1768, valued "a Negro man named Jefferre" at 20 pounds, while the more youthful "Negro Boy Named Simon" was invoiced at 33 pounds. A "Negro Garl Named Violet," increased the inventory only by the amount of 10 pounds, 13 shillings, 4 pence" (Goss, 458).*

A prominent Stoneham family, a branch of the Greens of Malden, also shows up in Goss' history. The Stoneham Greens were descendants of Thomas Green, an English immigrant who first settled in Ipswich. Several Green families settled in the eastern and southeastern area of our town. The Green farm, extending from the Melrose line to Pond Street, would be the home of five generations of the family. Forty-two Greens would be buried in the Old Burying Ground (Wengen).

Historian William B. Stevens in his 1891 *History of Stoneham* writes: "During the first century of the town hardly any family exerted a wide influence or furnished more leading citizens than the Greens" (27).

The first of the Green family to arrive in Stoneham, according to Stevens, was Elder Henry Green, a weaver, who came over from Malden. His son was

Daniel Green, born in 1681. Daniel's name shows up as one of two deacons of the town church, founded in 1729. Like his father, he also became a church elder.

Elder Daniel Green may have been the first in Stoneham to own slaves. In his will, he left to his wife, Mary, among other things, his "Negro woman and her children" (Vinton, 403).

Among the Greens in Stoneham were, in succession, four Jonathans and their families. Capt. Jonathan Green (1720-1795), a fourth-generation Green, was a leading Stoneham citizen. Leader of a military company, he was for many years a town selectman and treasurer. He was also a slave holder. In his diary, he recorded noteworthy events, such as barn raisings or an excursion to Nahant. Here are a few of his entries (Goss, 98):

- 1738      July 1    *Bought our Negro.*
- 1740      Sept 1    *Mr. Whitfield preached at Boston.*
- 1743      Nov 22    *Remarkable high tides, so high that it carried away ½ the Stacks on the Marsh.*
- 1743      Nov 31    *A Bear killed in Ephraim Brown's Swamp in Stoneham*
- 1744      April 7    *James Hay bought his Molatto Negro aged 8 yrs.*

Captain Green's matter-of-fact notations on the purchase of human beings, and their juxtaposition with other events, indicate how significant—and yet commonplace—owning a slave was for any family with the means to do so. That the eight-year-old was a mulatto—we don't know if it was a boy or a girl—suggests that the child was born of a black mother and a white father. Born of an African mother, the child's slave status would have been inherited, according to a 1670 colonial law. The child's complexion may have prevented him, or her, from remaining in the same household as the mother, as it could insinuate a sexual union between slave and owner, strictly forbidden under Puritan law.

Green's notes also suggest a relationship between the two slave-owning families in Stoneham, a tie that was reinforced in 1738 by the marriage of Peter Hay, Jr., to Isabel Green (Stoneham Vital Records).

The Green and Hay families are also noted in Silas Dean's *A Brief History of the Town of Stoneham*. Dean was a long-time church deacon and town clerk. Writing in the 1840s, he mentions a number of slaves in Stoneham, including "a negro named Cato, the son of Simon, a negro servant of Deacon Green" (13).

Dean also writes that the tavern owner, David Hay, kept a slave named Daniel Kingstone (10). And that an Irishman named William Toler "kept a slave named Dinah, who waited upon him to the end of his days" (14).

Town records indicate the extent of slavery in Stoneham. From 1730 to 1790, the births of 17 Negro babies are registered.

In the same period, we find 16 marriages or marriage intentions.

Although no slave could marry without his or her master's permission, matrimony was considered a stabilizing factor. Sometimes the marriages were of two slaves in one household. Other times they were slaves of two Stoneham families, or with one from a neighboring town. For example, "Mingo and Moll, servants of Peter Hay," or "Lucy, belonging to Mrs. Anna Hay, and Cato of Reading, Aug. 9, 1783.

That slaves could marry, however, did not mean they could enjoy the full benefits of matrimony. In a 2015 *Slate* on-line magazine article, historian Emily Blanck described the nature of "family slavery" in Massachusetts:

*Marriage was legal and even encouraged by Massachusetts clergy, but marriage bestowed no rights to the married couple. Men and women frequently lived apart, and a free husband could not impart freedom to his wife, although offspring of free mothers were born free.*

*The division of slave labor by sex, in particular, made it difficult to maintain a marriage. Whereas men undertook a wide variety of tasks away from the households, women were almost exclusively domestic servants. Even if a married man worked within a master's household as a house servant, contact with his wife was severely limited. Female slaves, as household servants, worked all hours and slept in the masters' houses.*

Married in church, slaves also had to abide by its strict rules. The first minister in Stoneham was the Rev. James Osgood. He conducted over 44 weddings, including the marriage of several slaves, among them, "Sambo, of Stoneham, married to Mercar, of Malden" (Dean, 29).

As many as eight Stoneham families, who had achieved greater financial and social status in the 18th century, owned slaves. Besides the Greens, Hays and Tolers, the Bucknams, Southers, Goulds and Bryants at one time owned slaves. Even the minister's wife, Sarah Osgood, is included. In 1747, a year after her husband died, Mrs. Osgood's name appears as the owner of Phebe, who that March married "Quecoo servant of Peter Hay, 3d."

## Peter Hay's Will

Patrick Hay (later called Peter Hay) was not the first European to settle in Charlestown End. But he was the first, Dean states, to build his home in what would become the center of Stoneham.

Born around 1657 in Edinburgh, Scotland, Patrick was bound as an apprentice, but unhappy with his situation, stole aboard a ship sailing to Massachusetts. Landing in Salem, he paid his passage by binding himself over to a farmer



in Lynnfield, working for him for the next seven years.

From Lynnfield, Hay explored the land to the west. Writes Dean: "He came over from Lynnfield with his axe and his gun, stopping for a few days only at a time and lodging in a building or hut" (4). Hay purchased land from the Indians, Dean continues, "for two coppers an acre," and began clearing.

A strong and ambitious man, Patrick was legendary in Stoneham for his vitality, business sense and accumulation of land, owning a large portion of the town's northern area. Stevens describes the Hay family as a "thrifty and prolific one, exercising a very large influence. . . . Peter Hay was not only the owner of houses and land and *men-servants and maid-servants* [slaves], but he had a multitude of wives [in succession], no less than four. He was one of the first selectmen when the town was organized" (23).

In 1730 Hay was "admitted to full communion" in the First Church of Christ in Stoneham, followed by his son, Peter, a year later. The elder Hay died in 1748 in his 91<sup>st</sup> year.

No less influential, prosperous or long-lived was his son. Stevens describes him thus: "Captain Peter Hay, son of the original Patrick . . . was one of the leading inhabitants during the middle of the century, a prominent man in public affairs, holding many offices and possessing a considerable estate" (49).

Captain Hay, as he was called, lived "near the Farm Hill Station, the house later known as the Hay Tavern." After the deaths of his first and second wives, Peter married Isabel Green, daughter of another prominent Stoneham family, with whom he had four children.

In 1768 Captain Hay wrote a will, assigning his estate to his family. In his *History of Stoneham*, Stevens summarizes the will. To his wife, Isabel, Hay assigns all his "indoor movables, etc., 2 cows, 2 sheep, top-chaise and use of horse, the use of one-half of dwelling-house, 15 bushels of Indian corn and meal, 3 bushels of rye, 1 bushel of malt, 150 pounds of pork, 2 barrels of cider, 50 barrels of beef, 8 bushels of potatoes, 1-2 bushel of beans, 8 cords of wood, etc., per annum" (49).

Use of one-half of the house, a stately edifice at the convergence of Williams and Central Streets, along with livestock, provisions and use of



*The gravestone of Patrick (Peter) Hay, the first of 27 Hays buried in the Old Burying Ground. Photo courtesy of the Stoneham Historical Society.*

adjacent gardens, meant Isabel would always be cared for.

Captain Hay also provided for four daughters and a widowed daughter-in-law, leaving them use of other properties and buildings. And he willed cash gifts to five grandsons and four granddaughters, whom he names individually.

What Stevens doesn't mention, however, is that he left full ownership of all his lands and goods to his son, David, whom he named as executor. His will, recorded in the Probate Court of Middlesex County, continues:

"I give to my well beloved and only Surviving Son David Hay his heirs and assigns for Ever both Real, Personal and moveable both buildings and Lands Goods & Chattels of Every Sort name nature and kind whatsoever."

These possessions included "my Negroes my wearing apparel my Gun Sword Cyder barrels and other Cash and all the money that I shall have by me or due to me."

*" . . . my Negroes  
my wearing apparel  
my Gun Sword Cyder  
barrels and other Cash  
and all the money  
that I shall have by me  
or due me."*

— The Will of Peter Hay

Reading Peter Hay's will, I am impressed by its detail and scope. Hay's meticulous accounting of possessions he is leaving to his family shows not only his material largess, but his caring for his family.

Conversely, his failure to even record the names of his slaves speaks of a callousness embedded in the institution of slavery, and the complicated ideology that supported it in Puritan Massachusetts.

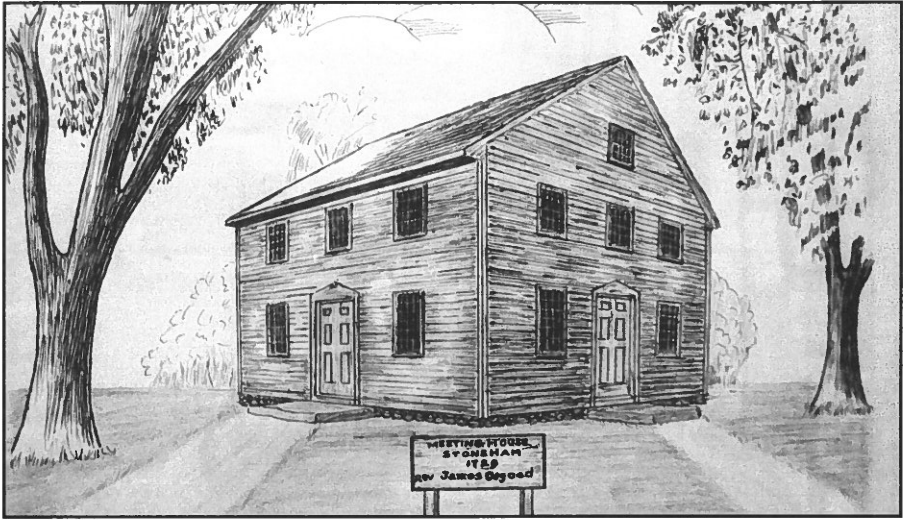
Peter Hay's slaves are not named because they were chattel, to be passed along with his other possessions. They were included with his gun, sword, cider and cash.

Hay's will suggests that, at the time he penned it, he was the owner of two slaves. Almost as an afterthought, Hay states: "Further, I Give to my Sd Son David Hay the two feather Beds & furniture thereof that my negroes usually Lay on."

Who were these two Negroes? In Stoneham Vital Records we find the 1737 marriage of "Mingo and Moll, servants of Peter Hay."

We don't know what happened to Mingo and Moll over time, or to other slaves Peter Hay may have kept. Hay, himself, lived until 1790, when slavery had ended in Massachusetts. Were Mingo and Moll still alive? Had Hay freed them in his last years?

We do know that Peter's son, David, owned at least one slave, already mentioned above, one of the few known who had a surname: Daniel Kingstone. And, as noted above, that a grandson, Peter Hay, III, owned a slave named Quecoo.



*The Meeting House, built in 1726, served as both church and Town Hall. Drawing by William Harris.*

## In the Meeting House

The presence of slaves in Stoneham led to the question of whether to admit them to the Meeting House, which after its erection in 1726, served as both church and town hall.

Dean records the outcome of a 1754 town meeting: "Voted, that the negro men . . . shall set in the hind seat in the side gallery, in the west end of Stoneham meeting-house, and the negro wives and other negro women shall set in the side gallery of the east end . . . and nowhere else if it be convenient . . . except it be on special occasions" (21).

Stevens writes: "The colored people, though in a state of slavery, were admitted as brethren and sisters to the church" (47).

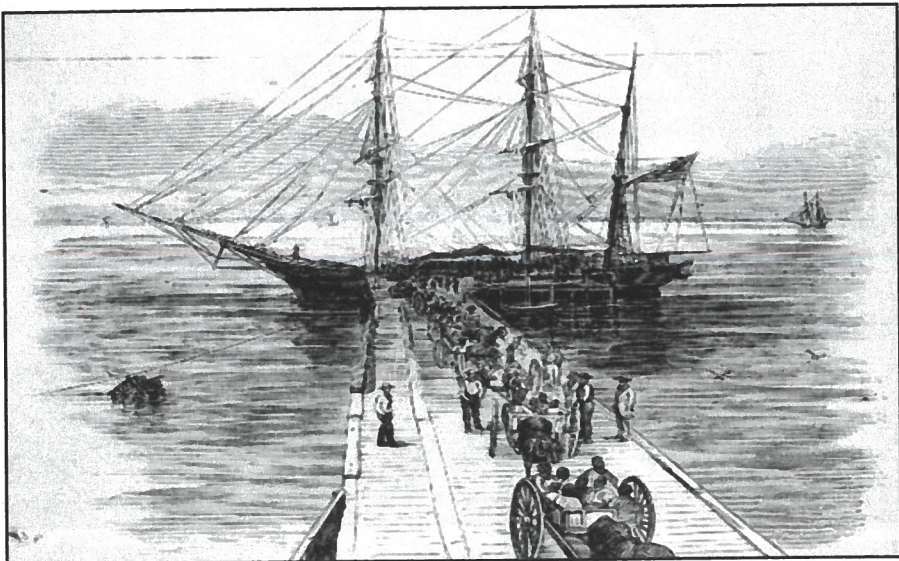
In one record of 13 individuals admitted to full communion by the Rev. Osgood, four of them are slaves: Titus, Pomfrey, Amos and Obadiah (Church Records).

Not all Negroes in Stoneham were slaves. Simon Barjona and his wife, Hannah, were free Africans. Simon was a shoemaker. Simon and Hannah were married in the Meeting House, and their three children, Abigail, Hannah and Isaiah, were baptized there by the second minister of Stoneham, Rev. John Carnes.

According to Dean, Mrs. Barjona, mulatto and part Indian, was known in the village as Hannah Qut. Simon, Dean writes, was of full African descent, although Hannah insisted that he was "nothing but a brown Englishman" (9).

We also know of another black resident in Stoneham, Titus Potamia, who may have achieved his freedom after fighting in the French and Indian Wars. Stevens writes: "Among her sons engaged in the wars, Thomas Gould and Titus Potamia in 1746 were stationed at Fort Richmond, on the Kennebec" (50). Potamia also served in the 1756 Crown Point Expedition as a private under Lieutenant Peter Hay.





*Unloading a slave ship. Drawing, Wikimedia Commons.*

In 1758, Titus married Peg of Reading. Recorded as “Negroes” in church records, neither Titus nor Peg are listed as “servants of” or “belonging to,” phrases which usually accompany names of slaves.

Peg appears to be Titus’ second wife. Married earlier in Medford to Hannah, Titus fathered three children, Hannah, James and Job,” baptized in the Medford Congregational Church in 1744, 1749 and 1752 (Vital Records of Medford). Stoneham records reveal a link between the Potamia and Barjona families. One year before the Revolution, Job Potamia and Hannah Barjona filed intentions to marry.

In Stoneham, there are fewer deaths of Negroes recorded than births and marriages, with no listing of any deaths before 1803. This raises the obvious question, why? Certainly, deaths of Africans occurred in Stoneham before this date.

Those listed after 1802 are five Negroes and one Native American. The latter is identified only as “an Indian man who was barbarously shot by some murderous person, November, 1813.”

From other sources we know this man was Nicholas John Crevay, a Penobscot, who with his wife was attacked near Spot Pond (Coady). Dean, who had a good ear for a story, writes that Crevay’s body was later dug up. “It was supposed by many that his body was taken for the purpose of dissection” (30). Later, when the grave was opened, the coffin was empty.

Of the Negro deaths listed after 1802, one was Hannah Barjona, mentioned above, in 1803. Another is Daniel Kingstone, 1808, the former slave of David Hay.

Another is Chloe Freeman, who died at age 84 in 1838. Could this be the Chloe listed in town records as “belonging to Major Joseph Bryant,” married to “Peter belonging of Daniel Gould”?

Stoneham Vital Records list two others only by their first names: Moses, 1805; and Peter, “who froze in the snow” in 1823. Was this Peter the husband

of Chloe Freeman? At the time of his death, Peter was 71. He would have been 24 in 1776, the year he and Chloe would have been married.

We don't know what year Chloe and Peter gained their freedom, but it was likely in the 1780s. It is also likely that they lived and died, as so many freed slaves did, in poverty.

I am haunted by the manner of Peter's death. Did he get caught in a storm? His remains and those of others lie under the grass, unmarked, in the Old Burying Ground.



*Joseph McGill, founder of the Slave Dwelling Project, has slept in former slave dwellings throughout the United States. In 2014 he stayed overnight where slaves once slept at the Royall House and Slave Quarters in Medford. Photo courtesy of Royall House & Slave Quarters.*

## Inhuman Bondage

As New Englanders viewing American history, we are tempted to see slavery as a curse existing only in the South. But, of course, that's not true. Slaves began arriving in Boston in 1638, a scant 18 years after the Pilgrims landed in Plymouth.

The first slave ship built in North America was constructed in nearby Marblehead. Christened *Desire*, the ship was fitted with leg irons, designed to cash in on the Atlantic slave trade (Quant). It might better have been named Greed.

In 1637 the *Desire* set sail for the Caribbean with a cargo of Pequot Indians, enslaved after losing a war with the English. A year later it returned to Boston with a cargo of cotton, tobacco, salt and slaves from Africa.

In her 2016 book, *New England Bound*, historian Wendy Warren documents how intertwined slavery was with colonization in New England.

Massachusetts early on developed strong ties with islands in the West Indies. Henry Winthrop, son of the Governor John Winthrop, was one of the first English planters on Barbados, where he tried without much success to profit from raising tobacco. It wasn't long, however, before planters on the islands shifted to another cash crop, sugar cane, which brought enormous profits. With every available acre under cane cultivation, planters had to import food for them and their workforce. Ships from Massachusetts supplied the islands

with dried fish and meat, vegetables and fruit. When they returned, they carried sugar, molasses, rum, and slaves.

Warren estimates that by 1700, "when the English population in New England was somewhere around 90,000 people, there were probably 1,500 enslaved Africans, and a roughly equivalent number of Indians in some form of captivity" (10). Meanwhile, hundreds of Indians, considered too unruly for bondage in New England, had been sold to plantations in the West Indies.

In 1641 Massachusetts became the first New England colony to sanction slavery when it adopted the Body of Liberties. A compilation of English and Old Testament legal concepts, this document contained 98 "laws," guaranteeing basic rights and responsibilities of the English settlers. Articles ranged from how much interest may be charged to the treatment of farm animals. Article 91 allowed for slavery. It permitted the enslavement of "lawful captives taken in just wars, and such strangers as willingly sell themselves or are sold to us" (Biblio). The phrases, "Taken in war" and "sold to us," are key here, the first authorizing the enslavement of Indians taken in armed conflict, and the second legitimizing the purchase of Africans off ships entering Boston harbor.

In the next sentence of the Body of Liberties, the Puritan lawmakers appear to be justifying slavery by basing it on Old Testament norms. "And these shall have all the liberties and Christian usages which the law of God established in Israel concerning such persons doth morally require."

In case there was any misunderstanding of their authority to enslave, however, Article 91 concludes: "This exempts none from servitude who shall be judged thereto by authority."

Slavery in Massachusetts was further cemented in 1670 when the colony extended the ownership of slaves to include the children of enslaved women, thus establishing slavery in perpetuity.

To be fair, we must acknowledge that there were some who opposed slavery. In 1645, the General Court ruled against "the haynos and crying sinn of man stealing," and ordered two slaves, who had been taken in a murderous assault on their African village, returned to Guinea.

The outcry may have had more to do with the manner in which the slaves were acquired. If they had been purchased legally, that is, bought at auction, there may have been no objection.

Another challenge to slavery came in 1700 when a prominent magistrate named Samuel Sewall published a broadsheet titled "The Selling of Joseph."

Sewall had been one of the judges in the 1692 Salem Witch Trials. In an unusual turn-about, Sewall later apologized for his role in the witch trials. Then in 1700 he denounced the trading and owning of slaves as immoral, using the Biblical story of Joseph, sold into slavery by his brothers, as reference.

This Puritan judge wrote his pamphlet on behalf of a slave named Adam, owned by a wealthy Boston merchant, John Saffin, also a magistrate. Adam had been "leased" to another colonist with the promise of freedom after seven years. When Saffin refused to free Adam, Sewall went public with his opposition. Sewall's trumpeting of Adam's case may have helped, but it took more than three years of legal wrangling and court appeals before Adam was





*Historian and story teller Tammy Denease performs as Belinda the Afrikan, one of several characters she personifies, at the Royall House and Slave Quarters in Medford. Photo courtesy of Tammy Denease.*

finally freed (Warren, 242).

Sewall's conscientious opposition to slavery, while it got widespread attention, had little effect on the spread of slavery throughout the Colony or the region. The number of slaves in Massachusetts soared from around 400 in 1700 to 5,779 in 1764. As C. S. Manegold writes: "The lure of unpaid labor made for an enticement too strong even for the righteous to resist" (45).

## Beside the Mystic River

Because of New England's diversified economy—small farms, sea trade and shop industries—northern slave owners never required the large numbers of slaves needed to run a Southern or Caribbean plantation. A wealthy merchant might keep several slaves, but most owners kept only one.

Even so, as Manegold explains in *Ten Hills Farm: the Forgotten History of Slavery in the North*, slave owning was ubiquitous. Manegold quotes a French visitor to Boston: "There is not a House in Boston, however small may be its Means, that has not one or two" (118).

Even in a small-scale business, slaves were a valuable source of free labor. They worked on farms, at sea, and in the trades. They also worked as domestics, cooking, gardening, splitting wood, cleaning, laundering, sewing, caring for children and waiting on their masters.

In the neighboring town of Medford lived one of the richest men in colonial Massachusetts and the largest owner of slaves, Isaac Royall. A prosperous planter and trader born in Maine, Royall had made his fortune from sugar cane in Antigua. In 1734 he returned from the West Indies and purchased a 500-acre farm beside the Mystic River, the Ten Hills Farm originally owned by Governor John Winthrop. There he built a Georgian mansion, along with a carriage house, barns, a summer kitchen and slave quarters. The mansion, known as the Royall House, and adjacent Slave Quarters, is now a museum, open for tours and historical meetings.

In 1737 Royall moved in with his family and 27 slaves. Recently, I heard story-teller Tammy Denease present as Belinda, a slave of Isaac Royall. At age eleven, Belinda was abducted from her village in Ghana and carried down river

to a slave ship bound for Antigua, where she was purchased by Isaac Royall, and later brought with his family to Medford.

When Royall died in 1739, Belinda became the property of his son, Isaac Royall, Jr., who inherited his father's plantations in Antigua and Medford. In his will, written before his death in 1781, he offered Belinda the option of her freedom or continued service to his daughter. After 50 years of servitude, Belinda chose freedom (Royall House).

The 1754 Census of Medford lists 34 slaves, seven of them female. A list of their owners, besides Isaac Royall, Jr., includes the minister, the Rev. E. Burrell; a physician, Dr. Simon Tufts, and Captain Thomas Brooks.

The conduct of slaves in Massachusetts was regulated by legislation and local ordinances. A 1703 law prohibited "blacks, Native Americans, and Mulattos from venturing out after 9 p.m. unless on a master's errand."

A 1745 resolution in Medford specified that any slave caught out past curfew was subject to a whipping in the market place, "not exceeding ten stripes unless the said Master gives satisfaction voted in the affirmative" ("Slavery in Medford").

Of course, slaves could be, and were, punished for a wide range of other offenses, including theft, running away and fornication. Warren notes two instances in which slaves, accused of burglary, were whipped and branded with a B on their foreheads (213).

Punishments also included the death penalty. In 1681, Manegold reports, that two slaves, Jack and Marie, were accused of setting fires. Jack was hung, and his body burned. Maria, charged with burning down her master's house and the death of a child inside, was burned at the stake (115).

Besides execution, the penalty slaves most feared was being sold to plantations in the South or Caribbean—a punishment for unruly slaves. This meant a sentence of life-shortening labor, as well as the breaking of all family and social ties.

The nature and scope of human bondage in New England varied. At one



*Portrait of Phillis Wheatley, engraved from a painting by Scipio Moorhead, a slave owned by the Rev. John Morehead, a neighbor of the Wheatleys. The portrait illustrated Wheatley's book of poems, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, published in London in 1773.*

end of the spectrum is the ordeal of a woman owned by a Boston island slaver, Samuel Maverick, who ordered his male slave to rape her for breeding purposes. We only know about this, Warren writes, because the woman complained to a guest of Maverick's, visiting from England, who wrote about it in his journal (Warren, 7).

At the other end of the spectrum we have the story of Phillis Wheatley. Kidnapped at age 7 in West Africa, she arrived in Boston on a slave ship in July 1761. A frail child, she was purchased by John Wheatley, a well-off tailor, as a domestic servant for his wife.

Historian Henry Louis Gates, Jr., writes that it was Wheatley's wife, Susanna, who went to the auction on the Beach Street Wharf, purchased her at a bargain price and brought her home. Susanna named her Phillis, after the schooner that had carried her into slavery.

Intellectually curious, Phillis quickly learned to speak and read English. Encouraged by Mrs. Wheatley, and tutored by her daughter, Mary, she studied classic languages, history, geography, literature and the Bible. Around age 12 she began writing poetry and within two years published her first poem. Her elegy on the death of a popular minister, the Rev. George Whitefield, was published as a broadside in 1770, gaining her a wide readership in Boston and beyond.

To the cultured society of the New World, which questioned the fundamental humanity of Africans, Phillis' accomplishments were an anomaly to the point of disbelief. To prove her authenticity, John Wheatley arranged to have her examined by the most revered intellects in the Colony. In October 1772, 18 learned men, including the governor, Thomas Hutchinson; the patriot, John Hancock, and the minister and poet, the Rev. Samuel Cooper, assembled to determine if Phillis had the intellectual and creative capacity to be the author of her poems.

In *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley* Gates imagines what it might have been like for Phillis as she faced her interrogators, a majority of whom were slaveholders.

*No doubt the young woman would have been demure, soft-spoken, and frightened, for she was about to undergo one of the oddest oral examinations on record, one that would determine the course of her life and the fate and direction of her work, and one that, ultimately, would determine whether she remained a slave or would be set free (6).*

“  
*In every human  
Breast, God has  
implanted a Principle,  
which we call Love of  
Freedom; it is impa-  
tient of Oppression,  
and pants for  
Deliverance.”*

—Phillis Wheatley

We don't know how long the examination lasted. "What we do know," Gates writes, "is that she passed with flying colors" (29). Afterwards, the judges signed a statement verifying her authenticity, a document that proved instrumental in getting her poems published. A year later the first collection of her verse, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was published in London. It was the first book of poetry published in English by a person of African descent.

Phillis, who had traveled to London with the Wheatley son, Nathaniel, returned home before the book came off the press to be with her mistress, who had taken ill. A month later, John Wheatley granted Phillis her freedom.

Susanna Wheatley died soon after, and in 1774, with the city now under British occupation, John Wheatley fled Boston. For a while Phillis lived with Mary and her husband in Providence, but returned to Boston around the start of the Revolution. There she met and married John Peters, a free African, who struggled to support her and may have abandoned her. They had three children, none of whom survived. Working as a cleaning woman in a boarding house, Phillis continued to write poetry, but she failed to find a publisher for a second collection. Ill and impoverished, she died in 1784.

Regardless of how individual slaves were treated, we must remember that human enslavement at any level created deep and lasting wounds. Phillis Wheatley, for all her relative freedoms, never ate meals with the family that owned her. She understood her place.

Likewise, the desire for freedom must have been a constant ache. Elizabeth Freeman, whose slave name was Mumbet, was quoted as saying:

*Any time while I was a slave, if one minute's freedom had been offered to me, and I had been told I must die at the end of that minute, I would have taken it—just to stand one minute on God's earth a free woman—I would (Royall House).*



*Peter Salem, born a slave in Framingham, was sold to Major Lawson Buckminster in 1775. Buckminster freed him so he could enlist in his Minutemen regiment. Salem fought at the Battles of Lexington and Concord and at Bunker Hill, where he is credited with killing British Major John Pitcairn. He later enlisted in the Continental Army and fought at Saratoga and Crown Point. After the war he married and settled in Salem. Painting by Walter J. Williams, Jr.*



## They Also Fought

In the years before Revolution, Massachusetts colonists increasingly saw themselves as a people apart from Great Britain. Resentful of the Crown's intrusion into their affairs, they used words like "enslavement" to describe their condition as colonial subjects. Likewise, the word "freedom" became a rallying cry for the emergent independence movement.

These words were not lost on the slaves of New England, who glimpsed in the heated language an opportunity to seek their own emancipation. The irony of white colonists seeking their freedom from England while enslaving others was also not lost on a prominent white man, James Otis, a mentor of a young attorney from Quincy, John Adams. In 1761 Otis called for the immediate liberation of all slaves.

"The colonists [of Massachusetts] are by the law of nature free born, as indeed all men are white and black," Otis wrote. "Does it follow that it is right to enslave a man because he is black?" (McCullough, 132).

Others in Boston also opposed slavery, including John and Abigail Adams, and Adams' cousin, Samuel Adams. McCullough writes that in 1765 when Samuel Adams was presented with the gift of an African slave girl, he promptly freed her.

Sadly, however, the colonial legislature, comprised of many slaveholders, failed to make the connection. Between 1773 and 1777, slaves and their allies on four occasions petitioned the government for their freedom, without satisfaction (Manegold, 209-210).

With the outbreak of war in 1775 came increasing challenges to the economic, social and philosophical orders that benefited from slavery. A growing number of citizens questioned a master plan that justified tyrannical monarchy at the top and enslavement of humans at the bottom.

In Stoneham as throughout New England, the Revolution brought new opportunities. Some slaves were promised freedom if they joined the battle against the British.

Official First Day of Issue



SALEM POOR RECEIVED  
COMMENDATION FOR HIS  
HEROICS DURING THE  
BATTLE OF BUNKER HILL

### *Honoring* **SALEM POOR** *Gallant Soldier*

DISTINGUISHED PATRIOT OF BUNKER HILL,  
VALLEY FORGE AND WHITE PLAINS

*Salem Poor, a former slave from Andover, was one of thousands of black soldiers who served in the Revolution. His heroism at the battle of Bunker Hill in 1775 earned numerous commendations. Above is detail of a postcard announcing the Salem Poor commemorative stamp in 1975.*



William Stevens writes that 98 men from Stoneham, a town of about 340—virtually every able-bodied man—fought in the Revolution. Many of them served under Captain Samuel Sprague. In one list of 57 men, the last eight—Job, John and Titus Potamia, Isaiah Barjona, Cato and Sharper Freeman, and Cato and Pomp Green—are listed as Negroes, some of whom, Stevens writes, “obtained their liberty by enlisting” (55).

These names are confirmed by an extensive study conducted by the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). In *Forgotten Patriots – African American and American Indian Patriots in the Revolutionary War*, these eight and three more—Isaiah Bailey, Caesar Malcolm, and John Webb—are mentioned (Grundset).

According to the DAR, 6,600 African Americans and American Indians have been identified as serving in the Revolutionary War, as soldiers, sailors, cooks, or in other support roles (79). Of that number, approximately 1,700 were from Massachusetts, 193 from Middlesex County, and 11 from Stoneham.

The men going to war were not all young. Titus Potamia’s name appeared in Williams’ list of men who earlier served in the French and Indian Wars three decades before. Titus Potamia’s name can also be found in *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War*, along with the names of two sons, John and Job (615). John was at Roxbury Camp in 1775 and at Ticonderoga, New York, in 1776. Job Potamia is listed in the Continental Army in 1777.

Titus and Job also show up in a remarkable book authored by George Quintal, Jr., and published by the National Park Service. The book is *Patriots of Color: ‘A Peculiar Beauty and Merit’, African Americans and Native Americans at Battle Road & Bunker Hill*.

Here Titus, age 57, is listed as a “black sutler”—a cook or provisioner. His son, Job, age 28, is categorized as “free.”

Job enlisted in May 1775 for an eight-months’ term and fought at Bunker Hill on June 17. His name also appears in 1777 as a member of the 1st Middlesex County Regiment, and from there he joined the Continental Army. But in 1782, a year before the war ended, he was reported “as having deserted” (182).

It’s likely that Job Potamia never returned to Stoneham. After the War, I



*Elizabeth Freeman, here played by Tammy Denease, was the first slave in Massachusetts to successfully sue for her freedom in the courts. Photo courtesy of Tammy Denease.*

could find no reference to Job, or other members of his family.

Four other Stoneham "patriots of color" fought at Bunker Hill: the free African Isaiah Barjona, 20; Cato Green, 23, "slave belonging to Dea. Green"; Pomp Green, age unlisted; and Jack (Thare) Briant, 40, "a servant of Joseph Briant, Jr., of Stoneham."

As did the others, Jack Briant received his Army greatcoat, a bonus for enlistment, then agreed to serve another month beyond his eight-month enlistment.

Jack Briant's case, however, is a clear indication that not all slaves gained their freedom by service in the Revolutionary cause.

In March of 1776, Jack's name appears in a run-away-slave ad posted by his owner:

*Ran away from his subscriber, on the 24th of February, a Negro fellow named Jack . . . has lost his upper teeth; had on when he went away, a blue coat, with large white buttons. Whoever will take up said Negro, and convey him to the subscriber in Stoneham, shall have three dollars reward (Quintal, 67).*

I could find no more information on Jack Briant. Five years earlier, with his master's consent, he had married Mary Oliver, "free mulatto of Lincoln." There is no mention of children in Stoneham records.

In total, 119 men of African or native descent fought at Bunker Hill or Battle Road. Many later enlisted in the Continental Army.

At first, Africans were prohibited from joining the Continental Army. In the fall of 1775 George Washington, a slaveholder, and his generals agreed to "reject all Slaves & by a Majority to reject Negroes altogether" from serving. Two months later, however, the order was reversed. As Manegold writes: "The raw need for men proved more compelling than shared prejudice" (Ten Hills, 225).

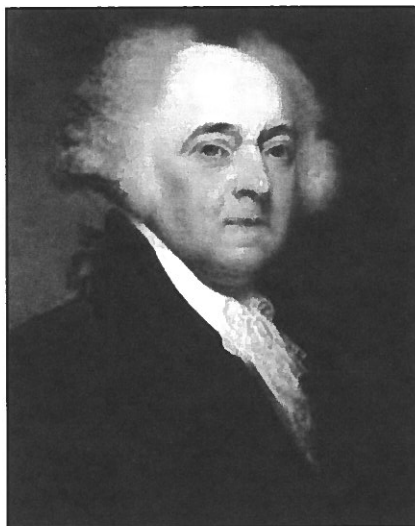
Washington realized, as well, that an increasing number of slaves were joining the war on the side of the British, who had promised them freedom. Writes a PBS author: "As the Revolutionary War spread through every region, those in bondage sided with whichever army promised them personal liberty. The British actively recruited slaves belonging to Patriot masters" ("Revolutionary War").

That so many slaves and free blacks chose to fight for the new American republic must, even today, give us pause. Seventy-five years later, in a remarkable introduction to William Nell's 1855 publication, *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution*, Harriet Beecher Stow reflected:

*In considering the services of the Colored Patriots of the Revolution, we are to reflect upon them as far more magnanimous, because rendered to a nation which did not acknowledge them as citizens and equals, and in whose interests and prosperity they had less at stake. It was not for their own land they fought, not even for a land which had adopted them, but for a land which had enslaved them, and whose laws, even in freedom, oftener oppressed than protected. Bravery, under such circumstances, has a peculiar beauty and merit (5).*

To suggest that the American Revolution became a path to a better life for most slaves in New England would be to ignore the reality that for many, life got much harder. For some, the war led to emancipation. But for many it also led to cold, hunger, illness, injury or death, or impoverishment after the war. And for others, it meant a return to the auction block. On the heels of Battle Road and Bunker Hill, merchants like Isaac Royall, Jr., judging that the war would not be favorable to their interests, began selling their slaves, shipping them off to plantations in the West Indies.

From England, Royall sent back orders to sell off the slaves he had left behind, men, women and children. The one exception we know about was his aging house slave, Belinda, to whom he offered freedom.



*John Adams, primary author of the Massachusetts Constitution, ratified in 1780. This document, as interpreted by the Supreme Judicial Court, ended slavery in the Bay State. Oil painting by Gilbert Stuart, circa 1800-1815.*

## Slavery and a New Constitution

Slavery in Massachusetts ended not by proclamation, but by the courts, gradually. The year was 1781, and the Revolutionary War was still raging when Elizabeth Freeman, mentioned above, and another slave named Brom sued their owner, John Ashley of Sheffield, for their freedom. These cases are summarized by the Massachusetts Historical Society in the series, *African Americans and the End of Slavery in Massachusetts*.

Elizabeth, also known as Mumbet, and her sister, Lizzie, had been slaves of a New York Dutchman who had given them to John Ashley, who had married his daughter, Annetje. Mumbet claimed that Annetje one day tried to strike Lizzie with a hot fire-place shovel. Stepping between them, Mumbet sustained serious injury to her arm, prompting her to sue for freedom. She may also have been encouraged to seek action after hearing a reading of the Declaration of Independence.

A Stockbridge attorney, Theodore Sedgwick, pled their case in the Court of Common Pleas and won. Ashley was forced to pay damages of 30 shillings and court costs. This was the first time in the Commonwealth that a slave successfully used the legal system to obtain freedom.

Quock Walker was another slave who turned to the courts in 1781. After the death of his master, James Caldwell, he was claimed by Nathaniel Jennison, who married his widow. Walker, insisting that Caldwell had promised him

freedom, ran away. But he was soon captured and beaten by Jennison.

Walker brought both civil and criminal suits against Jennison, charging him with assault and battery on a free man. He won the civil suit, with the judge awarding him the substantial sum of 50 pounds. He also won the criminal suit, upheld in 1783 by the Supreme Judicial Court. Persuaded by Walker's arguments, Chief Justice William Cushing wrote that because slavery was unconstitutional in Massachusetts, Walker must be considered a free man ("Legal End to Slavery").

The driving force behind these rulings was the new state Constitution, authored by John Adams in 1779 and approved by Massachusetts voters in 1780. The Constitution, while not explicitly outlawing slavery, implied its prohibition in the following language:

*All men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential, and unalienable rights; among which may be reckoned the right of enjoying and defending their lives and liberties; that of acquiring, possessing, and protecting property; in fine, that of seeking and obtaining their safety and happiness (Preamble).*

The Supreme Judicial Court ruling of 1783 was the death knell for slavery in Massachusetts. After this, no slave owner could expect his right of ownership of another person to be upheld.

Slaves granted their freedom, however, faced a bleak and uncertain future. How would they make a living? Further, what would prevent owners of aging slaves from freeing them to avoid responsibility for their care? To discourage the dumping of elderly slaves, some towns and cities passed laws requiring payment of a bond before manumission of a slave.

In 1783, two years after she gained her freedom, Belinda Sutton, the former slave of Isaac Royall, Jr., of Medford, presented a petition to the General Court of Massachusetts, requesting reparations for 50 years of slavery. A copy of this petition hangs on the wall at the Royall House and Slave Quarters museum in Medford.

Being illiterate, Belinda signed the petition with an X. The person who penned the petition was likely a free African active in the cause of slaves and former slaves, Prince Hall ("Belinda Sutton and Her Petitions").

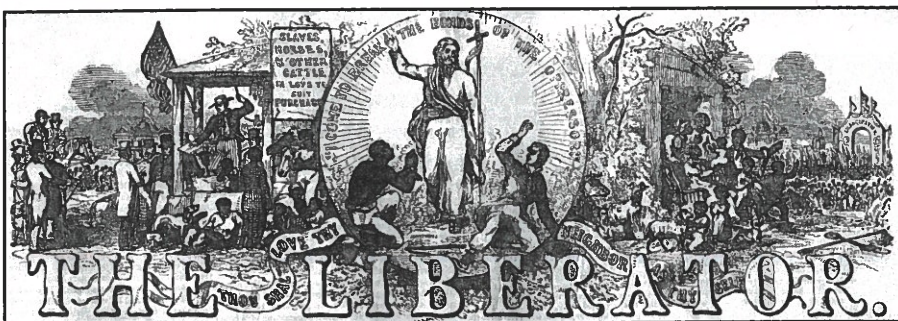
The petition, written in a style similar to Hall's, tells the story of Belinda's early childhood in Ghana, contrasting her early happiness with the cruelty of her kidnapping and the oppressive years of enslavement.

Belinda submitted the petition three times before the General Court granted her an annuity of 15 pounds and 12 shillings. After the first year, however, payments stopped, and Belinda went back to the Legislature five more times. As would happen to Phillis Wheatley, Belinda spent her remaining years in poverty.

Meanwhile, in the adjacent town of Stoneham, as across the Commonwealth, slaves were gradually gaining their freedom. Daniel Kingstone, the slave of Captain David Hay, son of Peter Hay, was one of them.

Now around 50, Kingstone "was set at liberty, with the rest," Dean writes, "but unlike some of his southern brethren, who take their liberty without per-





*Masthead of The Liberator, the newspaper of the abolitionist movement, published 1831–1866.*

mission, he chose to spend the remnant of his days with his old master" (10).

Why did Kingstone choose to stay with Hay, and why does Dean contrast his behavior with that of slaves in the South? We should remember that Dean was writing his history of Stoneham in the 1840s, two decades before slavery was abolished in the South. And that increasing numbers were then "taking their liberty without permission"—in other words, self-emancipating.

Kingstone may have remained with David Hay for economic necessity. In any case, it must have suited both former slave and former owner.

Kingstone's continued residence with Hay appears confirmed in the 1790 census, the first federal census taken in the United States. Here David Hay is listed as head of a household of seven: three white males, three white females, and one non-white, free person.

In this town of 381 people are listed seven other free, non-white persons. As three of them appear in the households of Joseph Bryant (one) and John Buckman (two), we can assume they are former slaves. Four other free, non-white persons are numbered in the household of Cato Freman.

Who is this Cato *free-man*? Is he the Cato, mentioned in Stoneham marriage records in 1783 as "Cato of Reading, married to Lucy, belonging to Mrs. Anna Hay"? The next time we see their names is in the birth records of 1790, in which they are listed as the parents of a baby named after his father, Cato Freeman.

What else does the 1790 census tell us? Because no other non-white households or individuals are listed, we can assume that other former slaves, as well as the Barjonas and Potamias, have since left Stoneham.

The federal census also gives us a good bird's eye view of what has happened to slavery throughout New England. In Massachusetts in 1790 there are 5,463 free persons of color, but no slaves. Neither are there slaves in Maine or Vermont. Slaves are still listed in Connecticut (2,764), Rhode Island (948), and New Hampshire (158).

Even with the records and stories we have, what we know about slaves in Stoneham during the Colonial period and the early years of American Independence is spotty. Much is still missing. There are more stories to be told. We do ourselves a favor to learn all we can, and to remember.



*"The resurrection of Henry Box Brown at Philadelphia, who escaped from Richmond Va. in a bx 3 feet long 2 1/2 ft. deep and 2 ft wide." Library of Congress LC-DIG-pga-04518.*

## A Haven for Fugitives

Massachusetts had been the first New England colony to sanction slavery. After the Revolution, however, the Commonwealth became a haven for fugitives from slavery in the South.

And come they did, by land and by sea. Run-aways and stowaways, they arrived in seaports up and down the New England coast: New Haven, New Bedford, Plymouth, Boston, Salem, and Portsmouth.

In 1794 Captain William Taber, who traded between New Bedford and Virginia, put a notice in the *New England Marine Journal* that he had "discovered a Negro on board said sloop, who had concealed himself unbeknown to me" ("South Coast"). He also posted the name of the owner. There is no record of the slave, named James, being reclaimed.

In 1799 a Maryland slave owner advertised a \$40 reward for the return of his slave. The ad read: "HARRY is supposed to be carried off by a certain Thomas Wainer of Westport in Massachusetts, a Mulatto, who traded here" ("South Coast"). The slave owner suggested that the fugitive's pregnant wife, the property of another owner, might be with him.

Other ships also smuggled slaves to the North. Historian Gary Coleman writes of four captains who "carried off fugitives singly or in groups of up to a dozen or even more" (49).

In 1814 in Savannah, Georgia, William Grimes, escaped with the help of sailors about the Boston brig, *Casket*, who hid him among cotton bales stored on deck. Going ashore in New York, Grimes walked to New Haven, then to Southington, Newport, and New Bedford. After working in various locations, he returned to New Haven, where he developed a thriving business as a barber. In 1817 he married Clarissa Caesar. The couple had 18 children, 12 of whom survived.

Unfortunately, his former owner discovered his location, and Grimes was

forced to sell his house and goods to purchase his freedom. In 1825, in need of cash, he wrote what was to become the first slave narrative published in America, *The Story of My Life, William Grimes, Written by Myself*.

One of the most daring escapes is told of a Richmond, Virginia, slave named Henry Brown. Brown decided to escape after his wife and four children were sold to a plantation in North Carolina. With the help of friends, who nailed him up in a box, he was shipped to Philadelphia. After 27 hours in the box, with only a small flask of water, he arrived at the office of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society and was unboxed and sheltered. From there, he continued on to Boston, where he told his story at a convention of the New England Anti-Slavery Society. For many years thereafter, Brown made a living as a lecturer, before moving to England, and finally to Ontario.

In 1823 a Supreme Judicial Court ruling in Massachusetts chilled the hopes of many refugees when a former slave named Randolph was seized by an agent and a deputy sheriff. Randolph had settled in New Bedford, prospered and bought a house. Now he faced extradition.

The case was brought before the Supreme Judicial Court. The attorney general argued eloquently for Randolph's freedom, but the court upheld the slave owner's rights and Randolph was returned to Virginia (Siebert, 27).

An increasing number of fugitive slaves now sought safety inland, away from the seaports. They passed along routes we call the Underground Railroad. In Massachusetts it had many lines and sidetracks.

The hub of the abolitionist movement was Boston. Here, free blacks, former slaves and abolitionist whites, including Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison, inspired men and women to action. Here Garrison formed the New England Anti-Slavery Society and in 1831 launched *The Liberator*, the chronicle and sounding board of the abolitionist movement in the North.

In Stoneham, abolitionists were increasingly speaking out about the evils of slavery. Abijah Bryant, a deacon of the Congregational Church, and his wife began hiding fugitive slaves in their home.

The house at 307 Main Street is no longer there. But if you step into the Book Oasis, you will have found the site. At the death of Abigail Bryant in 1892, a *Stoneham Independent* reporter wrote: "Mr. Bryant and his wife were strong abolitionists during the excitement of the old abolition times, they having stored away in their cellar many negroes during the day time, and at night conveying them as far as Lowell, and giving them a good start towards the Canada line" ("Death of an Old Resident").

Another Stoneham station on the Underground Railroad, according to the historian Wilbur Siebert, was the Newhall house on Green Street. Mary Newhall was an officer of the Female Anti-Slavery Society. That house, a yellowish, white-trimmed cottage with a four-posted porch is well kept today.

Fugitives also found refuge in Reading. Siebert tells of a local man who several times "saw at twilight two or three negroes, with little bundles on sticks over their shoulders, leave the [Jonas] Parker barn and turn northward" (50).





Abolition meetings in Stoneham were often disrupted. This print shows the "Expulsion of Negroes and Abolitionists from Tremont Temple, Boston, Massachusetts on Dec. 3, 1860." Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-112670.

## A Town in Turmoil

Although the abolitionist movement was gathering strength in Stoneham, the citizens were by no means in agreement. In political beliefs and sentiments, the populace was polarized. William Stevens would later write: "The question of African slavery was cleaving asunder the community. One element was aggressive, the other intolerant. Political fervor was red hot" (75).

The first abolitionist meeting in Stoneham, according to the *Stoneham Independent*, was held at the home of Henry and Abigail Green at 10 Bow Street. A staunch supporter of universal liberty, Henry was a descendant of slave-owning Greens in colonial times. Their daughter, Elizabeth, before her death at age 20, was also active in the abolitionist cause.

The meeting began in the face of local hostility. Wrote the *Stoneham* reporter: "So bitter was the feeling against this movement that the destruction of the house was threatened, and so determined was Henry Green that the meeting should be held that he loaded his gun and was fully prepared to defend his castle" (Green). Fortunately, he didn't need to.

Joining that first meeting was none other than William Lloyd Garrison, who "addressed that little band of invincibles" and encouraged them in their efforts.

For a while the abolitionists also met in the Town Hall, but they were often disrupted. As abolitionists rose to speak, they were shouted down by their opponents.

One such meeting occurred on Sunday, March 21, 1837. The account comes from Charles Fitch, who wrote about his experience in *The Liberator*. The Thursday before, Fitch had been invited to speak at an afternoon meeting in Stoneham. Arriving at Town Hall, he had found a small but receptive audi-



ence. The minister from the Baptist Church in South Reading gave an invocation, and a small choir led the audience in song.

"We had altogether a pleasant time," Fitch writes, even though they knew a pro-slavery faction might oppose them. The reaction came that evening when hoodlums burned an effigy of a young man active in the movement.

Returning to Stoneham on Sunday evening, Fitch found that this time the opposition had infiltrated the audience. First the meeting chairman, then several others rose to speak. Each time their voices were drowned out by the shouting. Finally, Fitch writes, "[we] gave up control of the place to the rioters. Thus the lecture was entirely defeated."

That spring, four prominent citizens were appointed to take charge of the Town Hall, and not to allow any meeting which might become disruptive. Then in May, the citizens of the town voted by a count of 62 to 33 "that the town will not allow anti-slavery lectures, and discussion" in Town Hall (Stevens, 75).

## A Fatal Fight

Charles Fitch wasn't in Stoneham a week later when, after another meeting, a fight broke out. A Boston reporter would call it "an altercation concerning an abolition meeting." It was between a 29-year-old family man, Timothy A. Wheeler, and a young shoemaker, Samuel S. Maynard.

Wheeler is described as a big man. We don't know what he did for a living. Originally from Concord, he settled in Stoneham and married Elizabeth Sprague. In the next six years they had four children, two girls and two boys. The last one was named Timothy after his father.

Maynard is described in the newspaper account as a "slight-framed man." A young shoemaker, he had moved to Stoneham from Vermont the year before.

According to a report in the *Vermont Patriot and State Gazette*, hostilities had started earlier after Maynard stuffed powder into Wheeler's pipe, which, when Wheeler lit it, exploded, causing him injury. The following Saturday the two came in contact again. According to a Boston newspaper, the fighting started in George Dyke's general store, where liquor was consumed. Accusations were made and threats followed.

After Dyke threw both men out, the fighting resumed in the street. A crowd gathered. According to the reporter, Wheeler "stepped forward and laid his hands on" Maynard. Someone else grabbed Wheeler's collar, as several others "rushed forward to save Maynard."

Wheeler, "with two or three others fell to the ground." In the melee that ensued, Wheeler was wounded. As he got up, he is reported to have said: "I am stabbed and Sam Maynard did it."

A doctor was called, and Wheeler treated and bandaged. At first the wound was not considered fatal. But four days later, infection set in, and on March 30, Timothy Wheeler died.

Maynard was arrested and charged with manslaughter. He spent 14

months in prison before being brought to trial before the Supreme Judicial Court. At the trial, evidence was produced and witnesses called. Maynard's defense attorney didn't dispute the stabbing, although no weapon was ever found, and no witness could remember seeing a knife.

Rather, the defense argued that Maynard acted in justifiable self-defense. After closing arguments, the jury was dismissed. An hour later they returned with a guilty verdict. Before Maynard was sentenced, his attorney, hoping for leniency, pleaded mitigating factors: Maynard's age, his previous good conduct, the loss of a sister, and a widowed mother.

The judge, however, ruled that "neither intoxication nor the passions of youth is a sufficient plea against the just retribution of violated law." Maynard was sentenced to three days of solitary confinement, to be followed by three years hard labor in the State Prison.

Back in Stoneham, Elizabeth Wheeler was left with four young children and no provider. Town records note Timothy's death, but there is no marker for him in the Old Burying Ground. The only other information I could find is that five years after her husband's murder, Elizabeth married Otis Lynde.

Looking back on this tragedy, and at the uproar over the anti-slavery movement in Stoneham, I am left with the question: if Wheeler and Maynard were on opposite sides of the slavery issue, who was on which side?

What was behind Maynard's injurious prank on Wheeler? It seems likely that Wheeler was the abolitionist, perhaps a vocal one. And that his instigation of the fight on Saturday night was not only in revenge for the exploding pipe, but had to do with Maynard's pro-slavery stance.

Although in conflict, the people of Stoneham would increasingly align with the abolitionist movement. In his *Liberator* article, Charles Fitch predicted that those who sought to stifle the voices of abolition would only spur them to greater expression. That proved true in Stoneham.

In 1838, as noted in *The Liberator*, 27 women of Stoneham founded the Female Anti-Slavery Society. They were led by Mrs. Sarah Gerry, president, and Miss Sally Richardson, vice president. Others included Miss Mary Newhall, corresponding secretary; Paulina Gerry, recording secretary; and five "counselors": Mrs. Levina Bryant, Mrs. Nancy Hill, Mrs. Rhoda F. Richardson, Mrs. Polly Willey, and Mrs. Prudence Lynde.

The women also urged their church to speak out clearly against slavery. In a letter to the Congregational Church, they wrote:

*We the undersigned have been convinced that slavery is an evil of immense magnitude and being deeply aggrieved that such an utter abomination in the sight of Heaven and is now sustained and defended by almost the entire Christian church in the South, with whom we are in fellowship; and, believing, moreover, that while we refuse to rebuke and remonstrate, we do in fact participate in their guilt, we ask, we entreat you to take such action on this important subject as will show plainly that our influence is on the side of justice and humanity."*

In 1839 the men of Stoneham also formed a chapter of the Anti-Slavery Society. Many of them probably attended an October church meeting, held at Deacon Ruben Richardson's house. There they passed a resolution affirming the right to discuss the subject of slavery in church. And they called on "every professed minister of the gospel to bear faithful pulpit testimony against the sin of slavery" (Church Records).

## The Mysteries of Providence

William Chalmers Whitcomb, age 30, was just beginning his career when he arrived in Stoneham. Not yet married, he had completed training at Gilmanton Theological Seminary in New Hampshire, then had studied for two years at Andover Theological Seminary.

Son of a New Hampshire deacon and his wife, Whitcomb had already begun preaching. The previous November he had given two sermons at the Union Evangelical Church of Salisbury and Amesbury on "The Mysteries of God's Providence."

In that sermon Whitcomb took on the ageless challenge to all people of faith—how can we believe in a just and merciful God when bad things happen to good people?

For the young minister, loss was personal. As a teenager in New Hampshire, he had felt deeply the death of two siblings. And now, as he was starting his ministry, he lamented the death of a seminary classmate, a promising young theologian who had recently become a minister in Amesbury Mills.

He also addressed another reason for widespread sorrow. A cholera outbreak had that year plagued cities and towns across the nation, taking the lives of over 60,000 people, old and young.

Like Job, however, Whitcomb refused to blame God, or to side with those who charged that God was powerless, or had abandoned humans to a capricious fate. Instead, he called on believers to keep faith in a Providence they



*1950s postcard of First Church in Stoneham, built in 1840 after the previous building burned down.*

could not see or understand. As he worked towards a conclusion, he repeated the words of the Apostle Paul: "The ways of the Lord are past finding out and his judgments unsearchable."

Today we get fidgety if the minister or priest goes over 20 minutes. A century and a half ago, there were few time constraints, and a good sermon would stretch past an hour. Parishioners expected a spiritual discourse that would both uplift and educate.

Whitcomb's sermons are good examples. A well-tutored scholar in Biblical and classical subjects, Whitcomb also kept up with current events. His sermons were full of quotes, allusions and illustrations; not only from sacred history, but from developments on the national and world stage.

His quotes came from the New and Old Testaments, from Martin Luther, John Milton, and from his contemporaries, including Daniel Webster and Harriet Beecher Stowe. He was especially fond of poetry, inserting passages throughout his sermons.

In the Amesbury sermons, the young reverend also raised the burning issue of the day, slavery. He railed against "those who make merchandise of men and women, who chattelize and rank with horned cattle immortal beings created in the image of invisible God" (Mysteries, 42).

On May 1, 1850, Rev. Whitcomb was installed as the twelfth minister of Stoneham's historic First Church, a Greek-Revival structure on Main Street, built in 1840 after the previous church burned down.

In Stoneham he found a community still roiled by abolitionist fervor. The real test of Stoneham's citizens came in September with the passing of the federal Fugitive Slave Act.

The new law, part of the Compromise of 1850, called for six-months imprisonment and a \$1,000 fine for anyone aiding an escaped slave, or preventing his recapture and extradition. Federal agents were reported on their way north to arrest and return former slaves to their owners.

Across the Commonwealth, the Fugitive Slave Act was debated. Some said the national law should be upheld. Others, that it violated every standard of human decency. In Stoneham a church deacon, and others had been sheltering fugitive slaves for years. Now they risked arrest and harsh penalties.

Most authorities were calling for enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act, including the governor and leading politicians. Among them was the esteemed United States Senator from Massachusetts, Daniel Webster. Webster had once spoken eloquently against slavery, but now he argued that enforcement of this "compromise" law was needed to contain slavery and prevent its spread.

But for Whitcomb, the Fugitive Slave Act was a challenge to the very core of Christianity.

"*We implore you to lift up your voices like a trumpet against the Fugitive Slave Act.*"

— an appeal from fugitive slaves living in Boston.



## 'I make no apology!'

I found the sepia photograph in the attic of the Congregational Church. Taken in the early days of photography, it shows a bearded man seated at a side table. Nothing fancy about his clothes—everyday collar, simple jacket, vest and trousers. He could be a teacher, or an engineer.

His posture is more military than ministerial. Yet there is something calming about his straight-forward gaze, the clear eyes below a broad forehead. He is confident. He is not afraid to say what he believes.

The photo is of Rev. William Whitcomb, the new, bachelor minister in town. On a cool Sunday morning in November, he stepped into the pulpit of the Stoneham church and delivered the sermon of his life. Later published and distributed under the title, *A Discourse on the Recapture of Fugitive Slaves*, the sermon was a full attack on the federal law.

"I make no apology" for speaking on this subject, the pastor told his congregation. He only regretted that he had not spoken out sooner.

For the text of the day, Rev. Whitcomb turned to the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, Chapter 23, verses 15 and 16. "Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee: He shall dwell with thee, even among you, in that place which he shall choose in one of thy gates, where it liketh him best: thou shalt not oppress him."

Whitcomb then read an appeal from fugitive slaves living in Boston, addressed to the clergy of Massachusetts. "We implore you to lift up your voices like a trumpet against the Fugitive Slave Act recently enacted by Congress and designed for our immediate and sure re-enslavement."

Two years earlier, two married slaves from Georgia, William and Ellen Crafts had escaped north and now lived in Boston. Ellen, a light-skinned African, had dressed herself disguised as a wealthy young man and boarded a train, traveling with her "servant" to Philadelphia, then on to Boston. Hearing that warrants had been issued for their arrest, Whitcomb said, had filled him with a deep sadness.

"And now I very much fear that some of our brethren, almost as dear to



Rev. William C. Whitcomb, First Congregational Church. Church photo.

me as any of the people of Stoneham, or the members of my own father's family, 'bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh,' will be doomed to hopeless captivity."

Whitcomb said humans are required to be law-abiding citizens. But when a civil law causes us to break a Divine Law, we must ignore it. When to follow the simple precepts of Christ is to commit a crime—that is, to shelter a fugitive slave—we must, when called on, commit that crime and be prepared to pay the penalty.

As Martin Luther King, Jr., would do over a century later in his Letter from Birmingham Jail, Rev. Whitcomb called on ministers throughout the region to join him in standing up for justice. And he stated a truth Dr. King would often repeat: that when freedom is denied to some, no one is free.

"Fellow-citizens and Christian friends, the new Fugitive Law . . . will enslave you and me as well as the black man—it will make slaves of us all."

Finally, the Stoneham pastor called on his congregation to join him in his resolve to pay the price, whatever it may be, for following his conscience.

"Hide the outcast or help him on his journey to a safer place," the reverend said, "even though you may risk personal security, property and life."

Like King, Whitcomb urged non-violent action based on the principle of love. "Shed no blood. Wield no weapons but those of truth and love. Use no arms but those God hath given you."

I can only imagine what it was like that chilly Sabbath 168 years ago, as the pastor finished his sermon, and men, women and children joined the choir in the closing hymn. Was the air electric? They sang:

*Oppression shall not always reign;  
There comes a brighter day,  
When freedom burst from every chain,  
Shall have triumphant way.*

In 1790 the federal census takers had counted 697,807 slaves in the new republic. By 1850, as Rev. Whitcomb was delivering his sermon, that number had more than quadrupled to 3.2 million. Increasingly, slaves in the southern states and territories were running away, in other words, self-emancipating. In the years to come, fugitive slaves throughout the nation would be captured and returned to their owners. But thousands more would be sheltered and assisted on their journey north.



*A common image used in runaway slave ads.  
Artist unknown.*

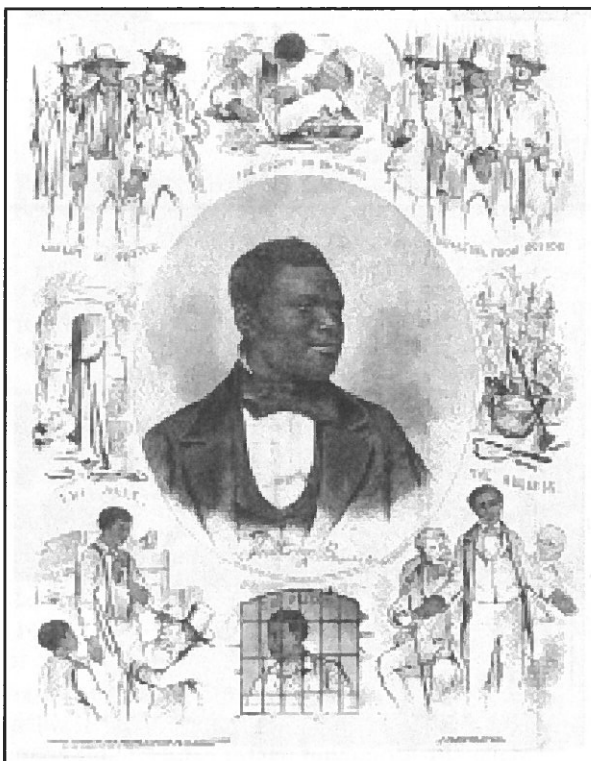
## The Gathering Storm

In the months and years following Rev. William Whitcomb's passionate denunciation of the Fugitive Slave Act, the struggle for freedom for America's slaves intensified. Nowhere was this more evident than in Boston, the hub of the abolitionist movement, and home to a large free-black community.

In February 1851 an escaped slave from Norfolk, Virginia, was serving breakfast at a Boston coffeehouse when he was seized on a warrant and whisked into federal court for a trial hearing. His name was Shadrach Minkins, and like dozens of others from tidewater regions in the South, he had found safe passage on a ship headed north.

In Boston, despite the racial prejudice of many whites, he had been welcomed by a vigorous and protective black community, made up of both free and former slaves. Black life centered in local churches, notably the Twelfth Baptist Church and the First African Baptist Church, also known as the African Meeting House. A school for black children had been opened, and a lodge of black Masons formed, later to become the Prince Hall Lodge. With the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, however, every self-emancipated slave in Boston and beyond feared arrest and a return to bondage.

For Shadrach Minkins, arrest triggered a chain of actions that would preserve his freedom, although far from Boston. At a courtroom hearing, before he could be transferred to jail, a cadre of black abolitionists grabbed and carried him off to a hiding place on Beacon Hill. The next day he was smuggled to Concord, then Fitchburg, and finally to safety in Montreal. There he became a barber, married and had four children. Minkins was the first runaway slave to be arrested under the Fugitive Slave Act. You can read more about him in a remarkable biography by Gary Collison.



*Burns' arrest and trial under the Fugitive Slave Act touched off riots and protests by abolitionists. Anthony Burns, drawn by Barry from a daguerreotype by Whipple & Black; John Andrews, S.C. 1855. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs, LC-USZ62-90750.*

William and Ellen Crafts, the fugitive slaves from Georgia that Rev. Whitcomb had mentioned in his sermon, also realized they could not safely live in Boston. Hearing that two bounty hunters were coming north from Georgia, the Crafts, supported by friends, fled to Nova Scotia, then boarded a ship for Liverpool, England. Remaining in England, they raised five children. After the Civil War, they brought Ellen's mother, a freed slave, from Georgia to live with them.

Another fugitive, however, was not so fortunate. In May 1854 Anthony Burns, a 20-year-old former slave from Alexandria, Virginia, was arrested in Boston and held for a hearing. Just two months earlier, he had escaped from his master, C. T. Suttle, and boarded a ship to Boston, where he had found work as a clerk in a clothing store.

Soon after he arrived in Boston, writes historian Chuck Leddy writes, "Burns made a fateful mistake: He sent a letter to his brother in Virginia disclosing his whereabouts. Suttle intercepted the letter and then sailed north to recapture his escaped 'property.'"

Burns' arrest triggered popular outrage throughout New England. Thousands of abolitionists, both black and white, attempted to free Burns from the courthouse, but failed after battering down the door. In the melee that followed, several people were injured and one deputy killed. Thirteen abolitionists were arrested.

In a widely reported trial, Burns was convicted and ordered sent back to his owner. Guarded by federal troops, he was led, shackled, through streets lined with thousands of protesters, to a ship bound for Virginia.

Within a year, however, Anthony Burns was back in town, his freedom purchased by the Rev. Leonard Grimes and his black Baptist church. Parishioners, who had raised \$1,300 to buy Burns' freedom, also raised money to send him to college, after which Burns pastored churches in Indianapolis and in Canada.

His health, however, was failing. After his deportation to Virginia, he had spent four months in a Richmond jail, an ordeal which had left him crippled and ill. He died of tuberculosis at age 28.

Burns' trial and extradition had a dramatic effect on public sentiment in Boston and throughout the North. Leddy quotes Bostonian Amos Lawrence, who said: "We went to bed one night old-fashioned, conservative, Compromise Union Whigs and waked up stark mad Abolitionists."

On July 4 William Lloyd Garrison stood before a crowd and burned copies of the Fugitive Slave Act, the judge's decision in the Burns case, and the United States Constitution. At an abolitionist meeting on the same day, Henry David Thoreau, who had sheltered fugitives in his home, said, "What is wanted is men, not of policy, but of probity—who recognize a higher law than the Constitution, or the decision of the majority." (Leddy).

In Stoneham, Rev. Whitcomb preached three more sermons against slavery and the Fugitive Slave Act. In 1851 he gave the funeral sermon for a friend and fellow abolitionist, Deacon Abijah Bryant.





*A familiar bedside scene in a Union Hospital. Harpers New Monthly Magazine, August, 1864.*

## Thanksgiving in a Time of War

In Stoneham, one year after his installation, Rev. Whitcomb married Harriet Lincoln Wheeler of Concord and began raising a family. After five years in Stoneham, he left to take pastoral positions in Southbridge, North Carver and Lynnfield Center. Meanwhile, a polarized nation had begun to fracture. On Nov. 6, 1860, Abraham Lincoln was elected president, winning all the free and none of the slave states. On December 20, before Lincoln had even taken office, the legislature of South Carolina voted to secede from the United States. Ten other states would soon follow.

Before dawn on April 12, 1861, Confederate cannons opened fire on Fort Sumter in South Carolina. The American Civil War had begun.

Every student of American history knows about the devastating early losses of the Union Army. So it must have been, the following November, that many found little to be thankful for. Not so, however, for the Rev. William Whitcomb, who on November 21 was invited back to Stoneham to preach the Thanksgiving sermon in the white church on Main Street.

Rev. Whitcomb began by reading a proclamation from the governor, a tradition in Stoneham to this day. Then he acknowledged the hardships and difficulty of the times, the "stinging Bs" of early Union defeats, Big Bethel, Bull Run, and Ball's Bluff.

Victory may not come soon, he said, and there will be much sacrifice, but it will come, "so sure as truth and virtue and liberty and knowledge and piety

shall prevail over falsehood, crime, despotism, ignorance and wickedness."

We can be thankful even in "troubulous times," Rev. Whitcomb said, even as David the Psalmist had praised God while wielding a sword.

"Let us rejoice, and thank God for the privilege of living and dying in this grand and awful time."

Like many, Rev. Whitcomb saw the Civil War as a righteous and necessary campaign to once-and-for-all rid the nation of the curse of human bondage.

"The panting fugitives in the Dismal Swamps of Florida and Alabama, the unpaid laborers in the rice and cotton fields of South Carolina, and the numerous runaways from the 'sacred soil' of Virginia to the safe enclosures of Fortress Monroe, are stretching out their hands imploring, with the Macedonian cry, 'come over and help us.'"

When war broke out, the people of Stoneham were quick to respond. No town in Massachusetts sent more men proportionate to its size than Stoneham, writes William Stevens. By the end of the second year, 269 men from Stoneham had enlisted. Hundreds more would follow.

One of them was Joshua G. Green, the eldest son of abolitionists Henry and Abigail Green. In 1861 he joined the Second Company of Sharpshooters.

## A New Commission

One of the hardest things any pastor must do is comfort a family on the loss of a child. As a walk through old cemeteries will show you, the incidence of infant and child deaths was heartbreaking. In 1850 one in every five babies died in their first year. Two in five did not make it past five.

"Scarce a family circle can be found where there is not at least one child missing," Rev. Whitcomb wrote. "In almost every dwelling, coffins have taken the place of cradles."

In 1857 Whitcomb had published a most unusual book, *The Early Dead or Transplanted Flowers: A Collection of Thoughts, Poetical and Scriptural, On the Death of Children*. The book is an anthology of poems Whitcomb collected and edited, including some of his own, that might bring comfort to parents who have lost children.



*Daughters Mary and Maria*

On the frontispiece is an engraved print of twin girls. These toddlers are the Whitcombs' own, Mary and Maria, who in the fall of 1855 died of illness. The grief William and Harriet suffered over the loss of their twins was profound.



*A ward in Hampton Hospital, one of over 200 Union Army hospitals. Harpers New Monthly Magazine, August, 1864.*

Just weeks before the death of the twins, Rev. Whitcomb had answered a call to pastor a "union" church in Southbridge. In his first sermon there, he rejoiced that he was among believers not only "free from pro-slavery contaminations" but also from sectarian prejudice.

For the next several years he ministered there, then in North Carver and Lynnfield. In 1856 Mrs. Whitcomb gave birth to another girl, Lizzie, and in 1858, a boy, Albert. Two years later, another daughter, Mira, died shortly after birth. In 1861, the year the Civil War commenced, Nellie was born.

Often in his ministry, Whitcomb sat beside the ill or held the hands of those passing from this world. He would continue to do so, but from now on in uniform. In 1862 Rev. Whitcomb accepted a commission as an officer in the United States Army, not as a combatant, but as a chaplain. He was assigned to the Union hospital in New Bern, N.C., an important river town connecting the sea to the inland railway. Captured by Union forces in March 1862, New Bern became a major staging point for the Army's black soldiers, both the Massachusetts 54<sup>th</sup> Infantry and the 1<sup>st</sup> North Carolina Colored Volunteers.

Soon afterwards, Chaplain Whitcomb transferred to the newly built, 300-bed Mansfield General Hospital in the coastal town of Morehead City.

J. S. C. Abbott, a writer for *Harper's Magazine*, visited this hospital in the spring of 1864, before the final bloody push of the Union armies. In the August *Harper's Magazine*, he wrote: "I spent a few days at a small hospital at Morehead City . . . which is a perfect gem" (320).

What he saw at Mansfield General, as well as the larger Hampton and Chesapeake Hospitals on the Virginia peninsula, impressed and inspired him.

Hospital buildings were strategically placed, well heated and ventilated. At Hampton Hospital, 35 cottages or wards, each containing 50 beds, were supported by surgeries, kitchens, pharmacies and supply rooms. Surrounding gardens and fields supplied potatoes, corn, apples, squash, turnips and all manner of green vegetables.

Abbott credited the surgeons-in-charge for their administrative as well as medical skills. And he was inspired by the devotion of the staff: nurses—male and female—orderlies, unit managers, cooks, and chaplains.

"Men are daily being brought into the hospital," Abbott wrote, "often hundreds in a day, in all stages of disease and prostration, and suffering from every conceivable variety of wounds" (308).

In each Union hospital, the chaplain reported directly to the surgeon-in-charge. Observing their response to the needs of the wounded and sick, Abbott placed the role of the chaplain on the same plane as that of the physicians.

"It is beautiful to see . . . how harmoniously and fraternally the physician of the body and the physician of the soul co-operate," Abbot wrote. "The Chaplain is the spiritual father of the great household; the friend, the guide, the comforter . . . of the sorrowing, the dying" (311).

As chaplain of Mansfield General Hospital, Rev. Whitcomb would have been called on day and night to comfort a suffering or dying patient.

In one of his monthly reports to the adjutant general, Whitcomb summarized his duties: They included "holding religious services twice on the Sabbath and once during the week, officiating at the burial of the dead, furnishing books for the library and papers for the Reading Room and Wards, [and] writing numerous letters to the families of sick and deceased soldiers" (Letters).

Besides their battle wounds, soldiers suffered from a range of diseases, which accounted for approximately two thirds of all Civil War deaths. The biggest killer was dysentery. There were also typhoid fever, malaria, pneumonia, small pox and yellow fever. So it should come as no surprise that Whitcomb, himself, would succumb.

One source indicates that he contracted malaria, and there is mention of a leg injury. From his own reports, we know he went home on medical leave to New Hampshire in the spring of 1864. Then in a July 31 letter, Whitcomb reported that he was better and on his way back to North Carolina. He was anxious, he wrote, to resume his duties, "to be of still greater usefulness to the beloved suffering soldiers" (Letters).

In the fall of 1864 the Civil War was nearing its terrible conclusion. As Abbott, the Harper's Magazine reporter, left the coastal hospitals, he sensed what was coming. He wrote: "The dreadful crash of arms soon must come" (322).

"  
*. . . with health and  
 strength nearly recovered,  
 I am on my way back to  
 my post . . . preparatory to  
 still greater usefulness  
 among the beloved  
 suffering soldiers."*

— Wm. C. Whitcomb  
 July 31, 1864

## The Dark Glass of History

'We see through a glass darkly,' the apostle wrote, and so it has been in my research of Stoneham's abolitionist minister, the Rev. William Whitcomb.

I read several of his sermons, following him as he pastored three churches in Massachusetts, then, not long after the start of the Civil War, accepted a commission as chaplain at a Union hospital in North Carolina.

From this time, I have no personal letters. But I did find several he wrote, as required, to the adjutant general, reporting on his illness and his return to duty. I have also seen one letter that his

wife, Harriet, wrote during his medical leave, requesting additional time for his recovery. And I have a copy of her widow's pension application after the war.

In July of 1864 Rev. Whitcomb was still on sick leave, recovering, according to a letter from his doctor, from an ulcerated leg. By early August, however, he had returned to Mansfield General Hospital, by the bay in Morehead City, N.C. His September report states that he had fully resumed his duties as chaplain.

But that fall, as the war intensified, he came down with malaria, one of the diseases that plagued the soldiers of both North and South.

I don't know if Harriet was with him. It was not unusual for wives to join their husbands in the officers' quarters. Some wives taught in the free schools set up for the "contrabands," slave refugees who followed the Union army. I also don't know about the Whitcomb children. From birth records of the following year, however, we know that Harriet was pregnant, and in the following March would give birth to their last child, a son named John.

The Whitcomb family record states that the chaplain died on October 29, 1864. He was 44. The official Army report states that Whitcomb died not of malaria, but of "acute bronchitis."

I was not prepared for the explanation I would find in the medical director's report. Hand-written and faded, my copy of the letter is difficult to decipher. I go over it several times until I am sure.

*William C. Whitcomb, Hospital Chaplain, was in September attacked with ... Fever. On Oct. 8 he became temporarily insane and while in that condition threw himself into the Sound near the Hospital. From the exposure he developed acute inflammation of the bronchial tube, and died on Oct. 28" (Letters).*

The "Sound" was the bay beside the hospital. Inflamed by fever, he had leaped into the cold water.



*The gravestone of William and Harriet Whitcomb, Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, Concord. Author's photo.*



## Reflection

It's May 2017, now, and a light rain has begun. I find myself at Monument Square in Concord, cars hastening on both sides. I have driven over from Stoneham to find the gravestone of Rev. Whitcomb, which I have learned, is in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery on the outskirts of this historic town.

But first I visit the obelisk memorial to those who died in the "War of the Rebellion." There are many names. Below the names of a general and a captain are those of two chaplains. One is William C. Whitcomb.

A few minutes later I drive out Route 62 to Sleepy Hollow Cemetery. Thanks to cemetery supervisor 'Trish' Hopkins, who goes out of her way to show me where to find the chaplain's grave site, I walk up onto Authors' Ridge, where the Wheeler Family plot is located.

Rev. Whitcomb grew up in New Hampshire, studied in Andover, and for five and a half years pastored the Congregational Church in Stoneham. But his wife, Harriet Lincoln Wheeler, was from Concord, and here is where she brought the body of her husband for burial.

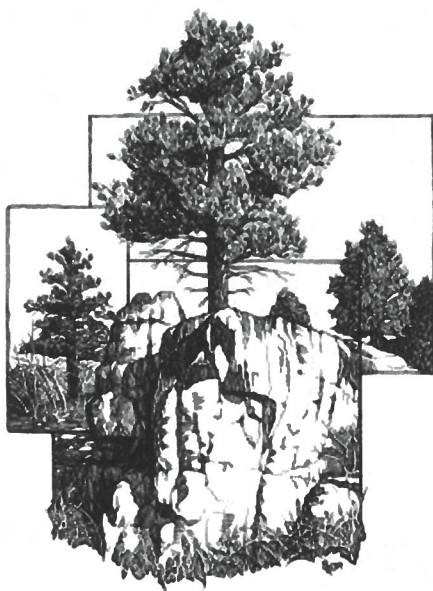
For a few minutes I meditate among gravestones and old trees.

When I first thought of writing this booklet, I was standing in the Old Burial Ground in Stoneham where no stones marked the graves of Indians and slaves. I think of them now, and of all those who suffered human bondage in Stoneham and beyond, those who were hunted, and those who found refuge. And of those who gave them refuge, or lifted their voices for their freedom.

What I have written about the people of Stoneham and the issue of slavery is just a beginning. I hope others, including our young people, will discover more information, and have more stories to tell.

For me, the research and the writing were personal. I felt a growing attachment to the men, women and children of the past, especially those who would otherwise go unnamed and their lives forgotten.

I especially felt a bond with the Rev. William C. Whitcomb, that passionate and compassionate preacher, abolitionist and chaplain, whose personal life was marked with tragedy even as he sought to heal the wounds of slavery and war.



To read the stories of slavery in Stoneham and throughout the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is to experience a loss of innocence. A loss of innocence about who they—our colonizing ancestors and founders—were, and about who we are today.

To realize that slavery was once accepted by most religious leaders and laity alike is a shock, a jagged crack in our rear-view mirror.

To know that in Stoneham slaves tilled the soil, split the wood, cooked the food, cleaned the houses, laundered the clothes, cared for children and animals—and fought in our wars—should no longer surprise us. It should, rather, give us a clearer understanding of our common past, and strengthen us as we confront issues of race and prejudice today.

Finally, may we honor all the men and women, slaves and free, who came before us.

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“In winter the bare trees are black against the snow and sky in the Old Burying Ground on Pleasant Street. Like frosting, snow decorates the gravestones of our town’s early families. The Bryants, the Bucknams, the Gerrys, the Greens, the Goulds, the Hays—our founders.

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